

Creating Stone Pagodas

Edward Canda

During the past several years I constructed a set of about fifteen stone pagodas at the Kansas Zen Center with help from other members. I've been asked to explain the purpose and manner of creating stone pagodas.

When I visit Korea, I love to meditate near the stone pagodas often found at temples, in mountains, and by honored trees. These experiences of Korean stone pagodas have inspired me to build them. Confucian philosophy and Zen practice give me a framework for describing the process. But my work is primarily nonverbal and spontaneous. If you want to build them, use these ideas only as a guide for working out your own understanding.

The Korean Cultural Context

In the Korean language, the words *suhk tahp* or *dol tahp* mean "stone tower," often translated as "stone pagoda" in Buddhist contexts. *Suhk tahp* are usually made by stacking and balancing unaltered stones into various size towers in a rather spontaneous and intuitive manner. They probably have a pre-Buddhist animistic origin involved with the honoring of nature.

In contrast, the East Asian pagoda derived from the Indian stupa, which is a reliquary for sacred texts and cremains (*sarira*). The pagoda is usually a large architecture crafted from stone, brick or wood. As a mandala, its central pillar represents the Buddha or center of the universe, and the four or eight corners represent various Buddhas encompassing all directions of the universe, or the wheel of dharma. The vertical stories represent the path to enlightenment. Buddhist ideas are sometimes applied to *suhk tahp*.

I've observed several types of *suhk tahp* in Korea. Stone cairns are often used as trail markers on mountain



paths. At places with special religious significance, people may erect prayer piles. For example in animistic contexts, a certain tree may be identified as the site of a special spirit with the power to help people. In Buddhist contexts, the entrance to a temple ground or some other special place at the temple may be used for prayer and meditation. Passers-by may toss a stone in such a place while making a prayer to receive blessings for themselves or loved ones. Sometimes the stones will be stacked carefully, creating delicate stone towers.

Elaborate *suhk tahp* may be built in conjunction with more intensive spiritual retreats and practices, as in the case of those built by Buddhist monks. For example, at Ma-i Mountain in North Cholla Province a hermit monk, named Yi Kap-ryong, built 108 stone pagodas between 1884 and 1914. The

mountain spirit gave Hermit Yi guidance through visions. He worked with the yin and yang energy qualities of the stones and stone tower configurations, while praying for the relief of the suffering of Korean people. Eighty towers remain.

As I offer suggestions for creating stone pagodas, I am not presenting formal traditional teachings. I am only describing my own way of relating to this process.

Intentions and Purposes for Constructing Stone Pagodas

In building the stone pagodas, one is thankful for the place and the beings that live there. The stones to be used are honored. As the towers are built, each stone is placed with loving attention to the stone, the tower taking shape, and the environment all around. The process

of building the pagodas and caring for them over time is a continuous prayer of compassion, wishing for the well-being of all in that place and all places. The meticulous care and attention put into the process of building the towers is mindful action. The builder clarifies and calms his or her mind and sets compassionate intention. Finding correct balance for the stones requires finding correct inner balance for oneself. This is healing for the builder and makes one aware of the precious nature of each moment. By creating towers mindfully, mindfulness is fostered for oneself and others who encounter the towers. Thus, everyone's spiritual practice can be supported.

The towers convey directly an experience of religious teachings, without requiring words and doctrines. For example, in Buddhist context, the towers embody the quality of poise required for sitting meditation and for mindful living in general. Human existence and all the conditions of human existence are precarious and transitory. Like the stone pagodas, mindful living and meditation require maintaining an equipoise which balances awareness of our precariousness and transitoriness with stability and clarity of intention direction. Another teaching embodied in the towers is emptiness. The towers are sculptures constructed of individual stones. They have no separate existence independent of these constituent stones. Likewise, the stones are constituted of earth substances and have been shaped over millions of years. Everything in the place is constantly changing, shifting, and dissolving. The perception of the towers, the viewer, and the viewed are all mutually creating and dissipating, without independent self-existence. Yet, each tower and each thing has inherent integrity and beauty and consistency. All of these things are woven together in the web of all interdependent, mutually creating and dissipating things, none of which have independent self-nature, but all of which have resplendence. This is the complementarity of emptiness (no independent self-nature) and fullness (resplendence, integrity, individuality).

Formal religious symbolism may be incorporated. For example, in the first stone pagoda constructed at the Kansas Zen Center, I incorporated a formal Buddhist concept into the foundation design. Four pedestal stones point in the cardinal directions and four other stones radiate between them. These eight stones represent the Eight Spoked Wheel of the Buddha dharma. Also, at the center hub of the eight stones, there is an empty space, which symbolizes the ineffable reality that goes beyond the formal teachings of the Buddha dharma. From this empty hub, all the spokes of the Buddha dharma radiate. As another example, when I constructed the second major tower there, I focused on Kwan Seum Bosal, The Bodhisattva of Compassion. The peak stone has a natu-

ral shape that evokes a sense of Kwan Seum Bosal.

Stone pagodas also can be understood as simulated mountains, connecting the energy of earth and sky. Groupings of stone towers create an impression of a mountain range in microcosm. Grounded on earth and reaching toward sky, they create a channel for the interconnection of earth and sky energy.

All places have dynamic spiritual energy flowing according to the contours of the objects, the constituency of elements of wind, water, air, fire, space and the patterns of interrelationship of all this. Stone pagodas can enliven, intensify, balance, or catalyze the energy qualities of a place. Every stone placed alters the configuration of relationship between everything in the space, thus changing the energetic quality and effect on people there. The builder must be sensitive to this.

Guidelines for Construction

Overall, there is a basic design principle that enhances the dynamics of ch'i: to juxtapose opposite qualities in a relation of dynamic balance. Each tower will have a predominant yin or yang aspect (while it should itself be harmoniously composed of yin and yang aspects.) So, when towers are placed in sets, their interrelationship and mutual effects should be studied carefully. For example, if one tower is strongly yang (e.g. with massiveness, tallness, sharpness, or pointedness), it should be placed in relationship with other yin quality towers (e.g. with delicateness, shortest, squatness, roundness, or curviness). Another way to do this is to juxtapose apparently contradictory qualities in the overall design of the tower, such as stones stacked at precarious and odd angles to give the appearance of being ready to fall over, yet to do this with careful balance and sufficient sturdiness so that the foundation will endure strong wind and mild jostling.

Don't use mortar or adhesives. The poise of the pagodas derives from the balancing of stones. The vulnerability of the towers is an integral component of their beneficial aesthetic and energetic qualities.

Before building stone pagodas, move through the space and view it from many perspectives. Feel the coursing patterns of energy. Sense which areas need strengthening, protecting, stimulating, or counterbalancing. Observe all the buildings, the trees and plants, the contours of the earth, the feeling of the air, and changes of energy within yourself in relation to all this as you move around. Sit in various spots quietly and meditate, remaining receptive to all these factors influencing the energy flow.

Preferably, use stones from the immediate area or nearby locale that are congruent with the local geology and geography. When selecting stones, pay attention to

their qualities, such as shape, hardness, fragility, etc. Offer prayers of respect, thanks, and appreciation at the place where the stones are found. Ask the stones' permission to be sure they and their place of origin are willing for you to remove them. Do not damage the place from which stones are taken. Select stones that have a

wide variety of shapes, for example, flat and uniform; flat portions and curved portions; round contours; sharp contours; pointed edges; tiny and thin (for wedging/shimming and delicate finishing of peaks); large and heavy (for foundations and lower portions of towers).

Select a spot for construction that feels like it can most benefit from a tower in relation to the surrounding area. Establish a relatively flat ground surface by clearing it of debris and/or placing down fine gravel. Scan the available stones to get a feel for which ones would be appropriate as foundation. They need to set on the ground securely. They need to be strong enough to withstand the weight of all stones stacked upon them. They should provide a surface with planes or good points of contact for balancing later stones on top. They should feel congruent in the particular spot.

This process of selection should be done for each level, as each level serves as foundation for the next. Moving toward the top, shift selection toward lighter, smaller, more delicate stones. Make sure the peak feels like a completion, with pointedness or roundness.

In general, each tower should include stones with contrasting but complementary shape qualities (like yin and yang), such as round and sharp; delicate and bulky; flat or angled; wide and tall. Towers should also relate to each other in sets of complementary contrasts, such as short and tall, predominant roundness or pointedness on the peaks, squat or thin; delicate or sturdy; many empty spaces or solid.

The lower portion of the tower should be especially well balanced and sturdy. Even if the entire stone pagoda is delicate intentionally, it must be well-balanced. Each level can be checked by pressing down at various points by finger tip, hand, or (with large towers) by climb-



ing on top and shifting your weight to be sure that it is secure. This also identifies weak or insecure spots that need to be wedged with shim stones. The upper portion of a large tower may contain small, delicate, or oddly shaped stones to accentuate the peak.

Occasionally step back from the tower in progress.

Observe the unfolding shape in terms of aesthetic appeal and congruence with the environment, including any other towers already completed.

The surrounds of the stone pagodas should be landscaped with gravel, rocks, and plants in a way that enhances the aesthetic and energetic qualities of the towers. They should be obscured as little as possible. Throughout any landscaping and upkeep, follow the principles of respect, compassion, mindfulness and working with ch'i.

Hopefully, people who use this place will have their spiritual practice enhanced by the presence of the stone pagodas. As part of their own mindfulness, they should be careful to respect the fragility of the towers, and not abuse them. If for any reason the towers need to be destroyed, this should be done with the same care, compassion, and mindfulness with which they were constructed.

References:

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